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ABSTRACT

IN DISCUSSING THE RICH LINGUISTIC HISTORY OF AFRO-AMERICANS, THE AUTHOR POINTS OUT THAT BLACK PEOPLE HAD A LINGUISTIC SYSTEM WHEN THEY CAME TO THE NEW WORLD AND FREQUENTLY HAD A KNOWLEDGE OF A FORM OF ENGLISH WHICH HAD BEEN INFLUENCED BY BLACK PORTUGUESE AND WEST AFRICAN LANGUAGES. DESPITE MANY ASSERTIONS TO THE CONTRARY, BLACK ENGLISH, "THE VARIETY OF ENGLISH SPOKEN OR UNDERSTOOD BY MANY PERSONS OF AFRO-AMERICAN DESCENT," IS NOT A DEFICIENT USE OF STANDARD ENGLISH. IT REPRESENTS A LOGICAL LINGUISTIC EVOLUTION TYPICAL OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO MANY DIFFERENT LANGUAGES. ATTITUDINAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL CHANGES ARE NEEDED WITH RESPECT TO THE UTILIZATION OF BLACK ENGLISH IN THE SCHOOLS. THE TEACHING OF STANDARD ENGLISH AS A TOOL LANGUAGE IS A TENABLE GOAL FOR AMERICAN EDUCATION, SO LONG AS IT DOES NOT PRECLUDE INSTRUCTION IN BLACK ENGLISH. THESE POINTS SUGGEST A RE-EVALUATION OF HOW TEACHERS SHOULD MEET THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF BLACK CHILDREN. THEY IMPLY A NEED FOR A NUMBER OF REVISIONS AND ADDITIONS TO CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION IN SUCH AREAS AS MATERIALS, CURRICULUM, TEACHER PREPARATIONS, AND CERTIFICATION. (A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL LISTING OF RECENT REFERENCES CONCLUDES THIS PAPER.) (AUTHOR/AMM)

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK ENGLISH : SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, numerous scholars (e.g. Stewart, 1967, 1968, 1969; Baratz, 1968, 1969a, 1969b; Shuy, 1969; Labov, 1966, 1967) have focused on the study of nonstandard English dialects, especially Black English. Their work has led to several new proposals concerning the use of Black English in the schools. Black English is the variety of English spoken or understood by many persons of Afro-American descent. This paper will summarize the historical development of Black English and discuss it in terms of implications for American education.

Although some individuals have begun to study Black English for undesirable reasons, e.g., faddishness, popularity, instant notoriety, etc., much of the work has resulted from increased recognition of the legitimacy and historical roots of black behaviour. The work is important for a number of reasons.

First, the study of Black English can be viewed as a part of the contemporary Black Power Movement which asserts that black people have a legitimate culture and history and that these factors should play an important role in the development of black control of black communities. For many years, black people believed the white myth that black behaviour was inferior and represented nothing more than poor acquisition of a white behavioural model. The myth

is presently being discarded. As a result of the recent drive toward identity, increased emphasis has been placed on such things as natural hairdos, African dress, African culture, and African-Afro-American languages.

Another reason why the study of Black English is important relates to the education of black children. Many persons (e.g. Kozol, 1967), both black and white, have charged that American education has failed to meet the needs of black children. This argument is related, in part, to the fact that black children have been historically "educated" in terms of the needs, aspirations, life-styles, and language of white children. This policy needs to be re-evaluated to determine its legitimacy. If it is not legitimate, new educational philosophies and practices must be developed.

The effectiveness of education in any culture is dependent on the presentation of knowledge in a linguistic form which is both understandable and natural for the student. If one accepts this thesis, it can then be asserted that black children are placed in a negative situation, both psychologically and educationally, when the school experience is organized around an unfamiliar and unnatural linguistic form. In fact, several scholars (e.g. Stewart, 1969; Baratz, 1969b; Engelmann, 1968; Wolfram and Fasold, 1969) are arguing that Black English should become an important and accepted part of the Black child's educational experience.

A complete understanding of contemporary Black English requires some knowledge of its development. In making the historical case, it should be recalled that Americans are often prone to overlook history. This reluctance is unfortunate, especially for black people, because it has led to general ignorance about the language black people use.

SOME HISTORICAL FACTS

History shows that blacks were brought to the United States primarily from Africa's west coast bulge. There was no one language spoken throughout the entire area as was the case with Swahili on part of Africa's east coast. Instead, hundreds of languages were spoken in the region (the same phenomenon is still true). Though these languages were different, they possessed a number of similar phonological and syntactical features. Thus, the major differences among the languages were lexical. In instances when peoples from various regions came in contact, it was customary for them to utilize vocabulary from one language in order to communicate. This pidginization (and later creolization) was to prove useful in the 16th and 17th centuries.[1]

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[1]Pidginization is the process of adapting one language to another. Typically, the process occurs when a common language is needed for trade purposes. Pidginization is usually carried out by speakers of non-dominant cultural groups who are in direct contact with a dominant group which speaks another language. At the outset of its development

In the early part of the 16th century, Africa's west coast was opened for trade. Though it was coastal, it had been largely isolated until this period. In this regard, the west coast was significantly unlike the east coast. Prior to the 16th century, most European exposure to West Africa was limited to contacts made by caravans crossing the Sahara from the east. Consequently, the interior of West Africa was better known to white men than the coast.

The first major European country to send seagoing vessels to West Africa was Portugal. Because of the number of languages spoken along the west coast, the Portuguese were faced with the seemingly impossible task of acquiring a new language at every port-of-call. Africans, however, had only to acquire Portuguese in order to communicate with those traders. Thus, it became inevitable that Portuguese become the first trading language of Africa's west coast.

As Portuguese became more widely understood as a trade language, it became the preferred communication medium for many citizens of the area. Dalby (1969) points out that the Portuguese spoken on Africa's west coast was not the same as that spoken in Portugal itself. Metropolitan Portuguese is a highly inflected language with a complex morphology. Like most peoples in similar situations, Africans,

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a pidgin is usually very informal, consisting of single word utterances (mainly nouns) and many gestures. Over time, it becomes more formal in that the vocabulary of the dominant language is embedded into the phonological (sound) and syntactic (grammatical) system of the non-dominant language. When this formal linguistic system becomes a native or first language for a group of people, it is said to have been creolized.

predictably, simplified many of the more complex grammatical rules of Portuguese by regularizing them.

From the western coast of Africa, Black Portuguese or Portuguese Creole spread subsequently to the New World, as well as around the Cape of Good Hope to East Africa and India and, ultimately, to the East Indies, China, and Japan. Indeed, Black Portuguese became the first world-wide lingua franca. This fact was probably related to its simplicity and efficiency, i.e., its regularity and utilization of a minimum number of linguistic rules to convey a given message.

Dalby (1969) reports that Black Portuguese probably came to the New World in the early 16th century when captive African workers first arrived in Spanish and Portuguese colonies. It flourished on both sides of the Atlantic for another two centuries, though it sharply curtailed around 1630. Today, the language is virtually extinct in the New World, except in an attenuated form in Brazil (alongside Standard Brazilian Portuguese). In Africa, it is a native language in Cape Verde and São Tomé and, to a lesser extent, in Portuguese Guinea and Angola.

In the 1630's and 1640's the Dutch ousted the Portuguese from their bases on both sides of the Atlantic. Although the Dutch were willing to adopt Black Portuguese as their means of communication with the Africans, strong Dutch influence was exerted on Black Portuguese, mainly in the area of vocabulary. Thus, another European language was

cast into an African phonological and syntactical mold. Black Dutch has survived in the New World in the Virgin Islands and constituted a major element in the development of Afrikaans in South Africa. This latter fact is vigorously denied by South African scholars who reflect the racist character of the apartheid political regime of the country.

France and England were beginning to establish power in Africa and the New World in the seventeenth century at about the same time the Dutch were replacing the Portuguese. The French first established themselves on the Senegal River area and in the Lesser Antilles around 1630 and on the coast of Guiana in the 1660's. During the seventeenth century, there was rapid growth of sugar plantations in the New World. The French responded by becoming very active in the slave market. The French, unlike the Dutch, made minimal use of Black Portuguese. Instead, a form of Black French emerged on both sides of the Atlantic, especially in the Caribbean, but also in East Africa.

Black French survives today in all original French colonies in the Caribbean (e.g., Martinique, Trinidad, etc.); Haiti; Louisiana; French Guiana in South America; and the Mauritius, Réunion, and Seychelles Islands off Africa's east coast. Dalby (1969) asserts that there is similarity among contemporary versions of Black French. For example, the Black French of Haiti and that of Mauritius are remarkably alike, though they exist a half world apart. Observations of this type provide support to the notion that black linguistic forms in the New World have substantial relationships to African linguistic

history and development. Unlike Black Portuguese and Black Dutch, Black French has not survived very strongly on the African mainland. The reasons for this fact are unclear, though they might be related, in part, to official discouragement of creolized versions of French in favor of standard Metropolitan French.

Black English, like its predecessors, had its origins on Africa's west coast. It was established as the English gained power in Atlantic waters during the 17th century, probably around 1631, with the establishment of a port on the Gold Coast. There were probably some additional influences before 1631 from English traders and buccaneers in such places as the mouth of the River Gambia and the offshore islands around Sierra Leone. Its development was probably facilitated by earlier creolizations of other African and European languages, especially Black Portuguese. By the end of the 18th century, Black English had been established at a number of points along the West African Coast, from Gambia to Biafra.

Presently, the most creolized form of Black English exists in Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Cameroon. Like Black Portuguese, it carried around the cape to Africa's east coast and the Pacific. Unlike Black Portuguese, however, Black English was widely established in the New World, probably because a large number of blacks were in constant contact with white English speakers on plantations.

Black English was brought to the United States from Africa or Jamaica (the main way station for slave transportation from Africa to the New World), either by the original slaves or by those who followed

during the next three and a half centuries. The most distinct forms of Black English in the New World survive in Jamaica, Guyana, and the coastal areas of Georgia and South Carolina (in the form of Gullah).

Obviously, Black English in the United States has changed over the decades, probably because of pressures from the educational and economic systems. These pressures have been supported implicitly by programs and attitudes which deny cultural pluralism in favor of a "you people are (or should be) just like us" philosophy.

Despite the eroding of Black English in this country, several features are still present. Dalby (1969) asserts that the most prevalent aspect of its survival is probably seen in the verb system. Coastal West African languages do not inflect verb stems to indicate person or tense. Person is typically indicated by a subject prefix or pronoun. Tense, or aspect, is indicated by a number of monosyllabaic markers which are inserted between the subject prefix and the verb stem. These markers focus more on <u>mode</u> of action than on <u>time</u> of action. Thus, African verbs are best thought of in terms of "continuative," "habitual," and "perspective," etc., rather than "past," "present," and "future." (There is no reason for every verb system in the world to conform to the latter system just because it is prevalent in European languages.) Thus, in a sentence like "Dat man, he be walkin," two interesting African similarities can be found:

(1) Subject pronoun is retained after the noun subject.

(2) "Be" is not inflected. (In fact, "be" is a marker of continuation).

The presence of "be" marks an important distinction in translating the verb which has no parallel in the English verb system. It implies a continuing activity, i.e., one which does not happen at any particular point in time. The closest to this concept in Standard English would be "That man is always walking" or "That man is typically walking." If the "be" is omitted from the sentence, e.g., "Dat man, he walkin," it would denote that the activity was taking place at that particular point in time, i.e., in the present.

Stewart (1967-1968), Baratz (1969), and Dalby (1969) are among those who have provided other examples of Black English which have some relationship with West African language, among them being:

(1) Absence of copula verb, e.g., "he black";"he is black"; "who he"; "who is he"; "I yo friend"; "I am your friend," etc. (This same feature is seen in Bantu).

(2) No distinction in gender for third person plural pronouns. For example, "he" can mean both "he" and "she" in the Gullah of South Carolina and Georgia. (Again, this same rule exists in Bantu).

(3) Distinction between second person singular and second person plural. In Gullah, for example, you is represented by "yu" (singular) and "yuna" (plural). (Dalby points out these same forms are used in Sierra Leona Krio).

(4) Prefixing or suffixing of third person plural objective case pronouns for noun pluralization, e.g. "dem boy"; "those boys."

(5) No obligatory morpheme for plural, e.g., "fifty cent"; "fifty cents."

(6) No obligatory marker for third person singular of verbs, e.g., "he work here"; "he works here."

(7) No obligatory marker for possessive, e.g. "John cousin"; "John's cousin."

(8) Use of specific phrases to announce beginnings of sentences, e.g., "dig"; "look here," etc. (The word "dega" has similar use in Wolof; "de" and "eh" in Swahili).

(9) Use of intonational ranges to mark meaning differences.

TWO MYTHS ABOUT BLACK ENGLISH

Many people, including numerous educators, believe some of the myths related to "blacks'" use of English. One of the myths is that blacks spoke nothing more than savage gibberish when they were brought to these shores. As they came into greater contact with whites, the myth continues, blacks became more "civilized." A part of the so-called civilizing included exposure to English. Slowly, blacks began to acquire a civilized form of communication but, because of their intellectual inferiority or physiological differences (e.g., thick lips, oversized tongues, etc.), they failed to acquire the language properly. As a result, a substandard brand of English allegedly evolved.

In recent years, a more liberal version of the myth has appeared. It can be dubbed the "cultural deprivation" or "social pathology" theory. In essence, it states that black's failure to use Standard English is caused by some sort of cultural or social deficit. This notion is used to account for behavioural differences black children demonstrate in relation to white children of similar chronological age. Rejecting this argument, Baratz (1969a) has summarized some

of the causes other writers have attributed to the black child's so-called deprivation. She mentions such things as:

> (1) disintegration or lack of family structure (Moynihan 1965; Schiefelbusch, 1967).
>
> (2) poor motivation (Katz, 1967),
>
> (3) inability to delay gratification (Klaus and Gray, 1968),
>
> (4) underdeveloped language and cognitive abilities (Bereiter and Engelmann, 1966; Klaus and Gray, 1968).

Many educators have accepted the deprivation view of Black English. Frequently, this acceptance has resulted in attempts to eradicate Black English and to replace it with a more "proper" form. It has prompted many teachers to refer thousands of black children to speech therapists to "improve their language." It has also stimulated many scholars to compare Black English with white linguistic norms. While it would be interesting to understand Black English in relation to other dialects of English, it is an ill-afforded luxury at a time when hundreds of thousands of black children are being destroyed psychologically and educationally in the nation's schools. Thus, the time is inappropriate to focus on "pure," theoretical work, except as related to specific applied purpose. More importantly, attention must be placed on new educational philosophies and practices to meet the needs of black students.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR AMERICAN EDUCATION

Many educators have adopted the deprivation theory, particularly

when categorizing blacks from low socio-economic backgrounds. It has led these educators to assume that black children should adopt the behaviour, including the language behaviour, of white children. The result has been the development of a number of programs to provide cultural and language enrichment for black children. These programs implicitly deny the legitimacy of black culture and language and attempt to eradicate it--despite any psychological or educational handicaps which might result--under the guise of helping the child adjust to life in the dominant white culture. Notable among approaches of the above type are those espoused by Bereiter and Engelmann (1966) and of many Head Start Programs.

The historical points just discussed suggest that black children, becuase of different cultural backgrounds, have numerous linguistic differences from white children. This fact does not mean black children are completely unique from white children or that all black children are the same. Indeed, there are numerous points of overlap between children from these racial groups. Individual black children vary as a function of such factors as social class, family structure, community size, degree of family and environmental cultural assimilation, amount and type of exposure to the white community, and geography.

Despite these differences, there is an unquestionable core of

black culture and linguistic behaviour.[1] It is the author's contention that every black person in America, except those born and raised in virtually all-white isolated areas, has a knowledge of this culture and a competence for the language--if he's honest!. Unfortunately, America has defined blackness in such negative terms (especially black language) that many blacks feel the need to deny any knowledge or awareness of black culture or language. The facts deny this assertion. "Rappin," "shuckin," "jivin," "dozen," "signifyin," "checkin," etc. are such central features of most black communities in the United States that it becomes ridiculous to argue their existence. Thus, the black child is not the non-verbal, uncommunicative, linguistically deprived being he is often made out to be. This assumption is especially untrue when the child is outside the classroom setting which tells him implicitly that he is culturally and linguistically inferior and deprived. In fact, black children tend to be extremely vocal. There is a rich oral tradition among black people, possibly related to minimal emphasis on written communication. (Abraham, 1964; Dorson, 1964: Kochmann, 1968; and Brown, 1969).

The issues raised in the preceding paragraphs suggest that teachers of black children need to make major philosophical and attitudinal changes. Basically, these changes should involve re-

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[1] In fact, some aspects of Black English have "slipped" into Standard English as a result of the almost inevitable influence one language has on another language when both exist in the same geographical region.

cognition and understanding of the verbal skills of an overwhelming number of black children and the legitimacy of these skills, especially those which deviate from so-called Standard English.[1] The importance of these changes cannot be overemphasized. They are an essential first step toward meeting the educational, psychological, and linguistic needs of black children in the classroom. On the basis of what we know presently, people react negatively to Black English, particularly when it involves grammatical differences from Standard English (Williams, 1969, Shuy, Baratz and Wolfram, 1969).

When negative attitudes toward a language system are characteristic of the majority of a dominant group, it is likely to cause great feelings of inferiority and rejection in persons who use the language (Fanon, 1964). These feelings can be heightened when the negative attitudes become institutionalized into official school policy in the form of attempts to eradicate the language and replace it with the more "correct" language of the dominant group. Obviously, these negative attitudes could lead to psychological destruction and educational alienation.[2] They also force the student to acquire his education in an unfamiliar and unnatural language.

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[1] Obviously, a portion of the black school population has legitimate speech and language disorders. Although no data are available, there is no reason to believe these disorders exist in substantially higher proportions than they do in the white population.

[2] This topic is being studied by the Language in Education Program at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C.

They also force the student to acquire his education in an unfamiliar and unnatural language.

These latter points lead into another major implication of the present discussion--the role of Standard English in schools. Presently, a large controversy is brewing as to whether schools should force black children to learn Standard English and, if so, how can it be taught best. The first question is usually answered in the affirmative, but often for wrong reasons. For example, some say Standard English should be required for such reasons as: (1) it is better English; (2) it permits clearer thinking; (3) it sounds better; (4) it is more sophisticated; (5) it reflects better education, etc.

The present author contends the only legitimate reason for black children acquiring Standard English is that any non-homogeneous speech community needs a standard through which everyone can communicate. Since the dominant language in the United States is Standard English and most information is recorded in this language, it would be easier to adopt it as the standard, especially for reading purposes. Thus, black children need Standard English primarily as a <u>tool</u> for educational acquisition. This does not mean that Standard English is a better language than Black English <u>or that it should replace Black English as the first language of black children.</u>

Given that one is committed to the teaching of Standard English as a tool language, especially for the purpose of reading acquisition,

the next topic to focus upon is how to do it. Those who argue for such instruction for some of the wrong reasons listed above simply ignore the legitimacy of Black English, attempt to eradicate it when it occurs, and embark on a program of Standard English instruction at the outset of the child's school history. These programs usually result in alienation and frustation for the black child, not to mention a slowdown in his educational development. This last problem is made more serious by the insistence upon using intelligence and educational achievement tests oriented toward white, middle-class children who speak Standard English.

Stewart (1969) has argued that one can gain insights into how Standard English can be taught to black children by investigating how English is taught as a second language in foreign countries. In these situations, children are typically given numerous educational experiences in their native language in the early grades. These experiences are based on the children's cultural experiences and are later used as a point of departure for teaching English as a second language. There is never an attempt to destroy the first language of the learners. This philosophy has been successful in teaching Standard English as a second language, with minimal psychological destruction of the child.

This experience suggest that the black child's early educational experiences should be based primarily on black cultural values and experiences in the context of Black English. If the

classroom is integrated racially or ethnically, some of the classroom experiences can be heterolinguistic and others organized around the languages the children speak. For example, recreation or music might be linguistically integrated, but language arts might be linguistically segregated. In the later primary grades, the teachers could begin to teach Standard English, both orally and written, by methods which emphasize parallel forms in the child's native language.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To review, the central points raised in this paper have been:

(1) Black people have had a rich linguistic history, which has included a great deal of language exposure and creolization.

(2) Black people had a linguistic system when they came to the New World.

(3) Before coming to the United States, black people frequently had a knowledge of a form of English which had been influenced by Black Portuguese and West African languages.

(4) Despite many assertions to the contrary, Black English is not a deficient use of Standard English. It represents a logical linguistic evolution of the type typical of people who have been exposed to many different languages.

(5) Attitudinal and philosophical changes are needed with respect to the utilization of Black English in the schools.

(6) The teaching of Standard English as a tool language is a tenable goal for American education, so long as it does not preclude instruction in Black English.

These points suggest a re-evaluation of how teachers should meet the educational needs of black children. They imply a need for a number of revisions and additions to contemporary education in such areas as materials, curriculum, teacher preparation, and certification. Though the job will be massive, it should be achievable in the richest country in the history of man--a country in which the values of justice and humanity are articulated to the rest of the world.

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